

Architecture is the learned game, correct and magnificent, of forms assembled in the light.

Nearly a century ago, Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier published this line in his influential 'Towards an Architecture', a collection of essays in which he outlined his modern architectural vision. Proclaiming a radical shift towards an aesthetic of pure form, often sober, symmetric and standardized, his focus on function was meant above all to foster a fundamentally altered way of living and interacting with the built environment.

Perhaps it was precisely because of his utopian attitude that he was approached by Belgian bibliographer **Paul Otlet**. Otlet sought to create a universal classification system of all human knowledge, hoping to benefit international peace. One of Otlet's ensuing ideas was a 'World City', an open city with knowledge, arts and Olympic centres to inspire its supposed one million inhabitants to pacifism, for which Le Corbusier made plans and models. The project never got realized.

However, some of Otlet's other undertakings did come to fruition. His 1930s '**Mondotheques**' were devised as personal workstations for producing, disseminating and documenting knowledge. They contained books, atlases, encyclopedic entries and telecommunication technologies of the time. He envisioned them as components that would link together and form part of a bigger 'Mundaneum', an ever-expanding 'paper internet', housed in an equally ever-expanding building.

The idealistic attempt to conceive of and accommodate a continuously growing body of work within one deceptively simple system is what binds Otlet's endeavour with the one of **Alexey Shlyk, Ben Van den Berghe and Atelier Oh**.

For '**Modular Models**', Shlyk and Van den Berghe reached out to the design studio of York Bing Oh (Atelier Oh) to join efforts in developing a new means to think about and experiment with exhibition making. Specifically, they combined Shlyk and Van den Berghe's research into the transformative ability of photography as optical architecture with Atelier Oh's architectural and furniture practice. Together they explored the relationship between space, image and the human body, by working out a modular set of elements to build architectural models. By taking on the architectural model, they made space the primordial parameter in imagining exhibition spaces. Models allow for a helicopter view, a position in (seeming) control. They not only make real or imaginary spaces and situations visible, but also the physical connections between photographic surfaces, exhibition architecture and the body. The model simulations make coherence intelligible.

The artists' modular project alludes to the practice of Dutch monk and architect **Dom Hans Van der Laan**. In 1928, Van der Laan formulated his 'plastic number', a 3:4 ratio that makes for a continuous sequence of segments and greatly emphasizes the relation of dimensions to each other. In line with this, he invented the '**Morfotheek**', a set of building blocks. Each block was designed in relation to the others in the set, hence translating his ratio theory in 3D.

Similarly, deciding which element should be in the set and why was a painstaking conceptual, technical and mathematical process for Shlyk, Van den Berghe and Atelier Oh. Each element had to be different enough from, but still in the right relation to, the others. Eventually, they ended up with four carefully designed elements per set. The starting point for all of them goes back to a standard door of 90x210cm, on a scale of 1:20. From this smallest element, the dimensions were then increased by an easy mathematical rule for the consecutive parts and bigger sets. The elements are now produced in a combination of inox, neutral mdf and plywood and transparent plexi in varying colours, but the options in terms of visual and tactile features are infinite. Holes are accurately drilled in each corner for the pegs that make up an accessible joining system between elements.

The sets are presented, in true Otlet-fashion, in purposefully built sideboards, designed to neatly fit the corresponding elements. They testify to the rhythm in forms and graphic intent. The display of the elements almost functions as a call to action, by having the holes clearly visible. Additionally, the sideboards are also modular units that can be joined together to form a bigger working surface.

A number of black boxes contain miniature photographs by Shlyk and Van den Berghe. They serve as an introduction into their visual vocabulary and as photographic objects which can be applied to the building elements. The endless series of 'image objects' that arise in this manner, greatly influences the amount of architectural opportunities.

The modular model building sets attest not only to Van der Laan's rationale, but also to his empirical legacy. A given space can be rebuilt quickly. Precisely because a model is always an approximation of space, there is great freedom to be found in it - it doesn't have to be completely exact, or even, it can't. Imagination, (il)logic and coincidence are all at work at the same time. Moreover, the building sets provide a recognisable, intuitive and open-ended means to create. An element of play, and learning through play, is inherently embedded in engaging with these sets and images. They function as thinking tools, enabling understanding from and whilst making.

Especially with respect to the photographic layer of the project, the immediate (visual) experience of the model becomes a source of inspiration. For the artists, the modular model is a triggering method to study and play with so-called '**photographic architecture**'. This term was defined by American architectural historian Claire Zimmerman as the myriad ways in which "new ideas and buildings arose from the interplay of photography and architecture, transforming how we see the world and how we act on it". It is this very interaction between space and image, and the embodied experience of both, that has been at the centre of the artists' collaborative practice.

Photographing the models acts as a live-action visualization of the affecting conditions. It is, in a certain sense, asserting the impact of "forms assembled in the light". The photographs offer deeper insights in the essence of existing spaces and spark fresh ideas for future ones, for instance through an unexpected angle or the accidental glow of a particular material. The photographic qualities of the materials (their bright or subdued colours, their shiny or matte characteristics, their socio-cultural meanings,...), but also of their display and shape as sculptural objects on their own, thus become essential considerations. In this sense, the door is an interesting starting point, as it offers a viewpoint right away. Furthermore, the photographs might also serve as manuals to rebuild earlier models or as (three-dimensional) illusions which could be used again later - playing into the meta-layering of spaces, be they fact or fiction.

However, the modular play has rules and limitations; building is indeed "a learned game" with correct outcomes. Notwithstanding the spontaneous process, freed from professional objections or obligations, there is a grounding bottomline to building these models. Regardless of how the framework can be bent and expanded, after all, the question will always remain: "Is it possible?" Therefore, the modular models are also still a practical tool. The building sets make up a dynamic toolkit to develop transformative spatial installations. In visualizing what can be done with or shown in a specific space, the models also enhance the construction of narrative and emotions in which the public gets immersed, both mentally and physically.

For the exhibition 'Modular Models', in-situ interventions relate the ongoing work to the exposed (modular) mechanics of the peculiar gallery space (designed by the Antwerp architect Lorenzo Brackeva in 2015). With its mechanical windows, mirrors and doors, the space and the work blend as a total installation in and of itself, embracing both the possible and impossible.

'Modular Models' is considered as a work-in-progress residency. During the opening and closing weekend, visitors are invited to activate and engage with the sets, generating different perspectives and possibilities. However, there will be no final end result, no definitive presentation. Just like Otlet's projects, this body of work might forever be an incomplete complete set - albeit a "magnificent" one maybe?

Text by Eline Verstegen